

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## KIRTLAND'S WARBLER AIDED IN CONFLICT WITH COWBIRDS

Nearly two dozen traps have been set by U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists in an effort to keep cowbirds out of the nests of the endangered Kirtland's warbler in its only remaining nesting area of Michigan, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

"This is the third year a cooperative effort with the U.S. Forest Service, the State of Michigan, and the National Audubon Society has been mounted to aid this small bird. We are now optimistic that the species can be saved from extinction, which was dangerously near in 1971 when its population dipped to an all time low of only 400 survivors in the wild, after a 60 percent population drop over the 1961-1971 decade."

Today there are an estimated 432 of these warblers breeding in Michigan, and that number is expected to increase with the breeding season now underway.

The declining warbler population puzzled biologists for years. This bluish-gray small bird, renowned for its constantly bobbing tail, breeds only in the lower peninsula of Michigan and winters in the Bahamas. It nests almost exclusively in young jack pine trees, so the U.S. Forest Service and the State of Michigan set aside over 4,000 acres of forest in the 1960's to be managed solely for the Kirtland's warbler's benefit, primarily by selective cutting and burning to encourage new jack pine growth.

Despite these efforts the bird's decline continued, prompting a cooperative Federal-State-private study which singled out the brown-headed cowbird as another major culprit threatening the warbler's precarious existence. The female cowbird, slightly larger than the warbler, doesn't build a nest of her own. Instead, she removes eggs from other bird nests, lays hers, and leaves her young to be hatched and fledged by foster parents.

(over)

This piggy-back cradling of cowbird eggs in Kirtland's warbler nests had a devastating effect on warbler nesting--nearly 80 percent of warbler eggs were being lost. The Kirtland's warbler usually lays five eggs, and roughly only one of five were hatching.

A three-pronged program, starting in 1972, called for cowbird control, managing forests areas to provide young jack pine trees, and setting aside additional forest lands for the Kirtland's warbler.

That spring 15 decoy traps baited with sunflower seeds, fresh water, and live cowbirds were set on seven warbler nesting areas. Over 2,200 cowbirds were trapped and warbler egg losses dropped on three of the areas from 65 percent to 6 percent. The number of young warblers reaching the wing that year nearly tripled.

In 1973, 19 traps were set in the seven warbler areas. A separate one was established outside the known warbler nest areas to see how extensively cowbirds were moving into the general vicinity. Over 3,000 cowbirds were removed from the warblers' areas last spring, and a nest survey showed that not one warbler nest had been invaded in three of the seven areas. A population increase of eight percent was recorded.

This year the number of traps has been increased to 23. The National Audubon Society has a study underway of the Kirtland's warbler wintering areas in the Bahamas to see if as-yet-unknown factors there can be manipulated in the bird's favor.

The recovery program for the endangered Kirtland's warbler will continue as long as necessary. Although the bird will probably never reach the population level most other warblers enjoy, every effort is being made to insure that some Kirtland's warblers add luster to the jack pine barrens of north central Michigan.

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